

“Attacking the Common Core Standards” Informational Texts – Part Two: Historical Context

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In this, the second article in our series on “Attacking the Common Core Standards,” we’re taking a look at Informational Texts Standards – Part Two in our Informational Texts standards focus.



In our first article [“Attacking the Common Core Standards” Informational Texts – Part One](#), we looked at the idea of reading and analyzing simple biographies as one way to approach Informational Texts. In this article, we will be looking at the historical background and context of a novel, play, or poem as an approach to the Informational Text Standards for ELA.

Suppose you are teaching a novel rich in historical context, such as Mildred D. Taylor’s *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. Clearly, it would be obvious to look at the era in which the story takes place – during the Great Depression. Having students read an article or complete research on the Great Depression would give students a clear background of the struggles of the era, helping them to comprehend the book on a deeper level.

But what about exploring even further? Remember, we want to dig into those Informational Texts that not only help students understand the world around them better, but also help them understand the literature better. Every single thing you do to help students further understand the depth and complexities of the novel, play, or poem they are reading—the better—not just aiding students’ comprehension of the literature, but also reinforcing those Informational Text standards. So, what about having students read informational texts (including first-person accounts or memoirs, news articles, magazine articles, encyclopedia and Internet articles, etc.) that are related to the historical context of the literature you are studying? Let’s take a look again at *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*.

Some other options for exploring Informational Texts within the historical context are researching and reading about such “social studies” subjects as Sharecroppers; the South during the Great Depression; the history of Mississippi; lynch mobs, nightmen, and hangings; the KKK; segregation and Brown vs. the Board of Education; and Jim Crow laws. Want to get into scientific articles? Have students research/read “Some racial peculiarities of the Negro brain,” published in 1906 in the *American Journal of Anatomy* by Robert Bennett Bean, or conduct research on how the weather of the Dust Bowl affected agriculture, or scientific advancements or inventions from 1920-1930.

So what do you do with a required novel that isn’t so obviously rich with historical context? Fear not. Let’s look at Katherine Paterson’s *Bridge to Terabithia*. While you may have to do a little digging to find out some way to address the historical context, it is still there. First, students can do a little research on the inspiration for the

book—a true event in which Paterson’s son’s friend was struck and killed by lightning in 1974. Students can research C.S. Lewis and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which Leslie lends to Jess in the book. Have students research and read about the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., or have students explore the reasons *Bridge to Terabithia* was #8 on the American Library Association’s List of the most banned and challenged books of 1990-2000. Students can also look at when the novel was written (1977) to research the trends, news, and important people of the time. Finally, students can conduct an analysis (compare/contrast) between the novel and the movie (Disney, 2007), also touching on an Informational Text standard (RI 6.7, RI 7.7, RI 8.7).

Some “scientific” approaches to *Bridge to Terabithia* could be research on the effects of depression, the Kübler-Ross Five Stages of Grief, or how lightning works.

As I mentioned in the article on Informational Texts – Part One on biographies, simply reading an article or passage is not enough to help students grasp 1) the differences between non-fiction and fiction, and 2) the nuances that help students read and understand a non-fictional text.

Here are some general questions that can be used with most non-fictional texts to help students dig deeper into the article/document to master those Informational Text standards:

What features do you notice on the page? (Title, headings, sub-headings, keywords, illustrations, charts, graphics, pictures, etc.)

What do you see in the pictures/illustrations? What can you infer about the picture(s)? What do these picture(s) tell you about the article you are reading?

What is the author’s purpose of this document? How do you know?

What is the main idea of this document? Provide details to support your response.

Would this document be considered persuasive, narrative, descriptive, or expository? Give reasons for your choice.

How does the author feel towards the subject of the document? What loaded or biased language do you notice, if any?

If there is loaded or biased language, what do you think is the author’s reason for this? If you cannot find any loaded or biased language, why do you think that is?

Document any interesting, unknown, or specialized vocabulary from the document. Look up these words and define them in your own words within the context of the article.

What effect does the use of these words have on your understanding of the information in this text?

How are the details of this text arranged? (Cause/effect, chronological, compare/contrast, order of importance) What key words support your choice?

Write an objective summary of the text, noting the most important points or milestones in your summary. Be sure to include dates if appropriate.

What questions do you want answered after reading this text? What methods might you use to find the answers to those questions?

There is no need for students to be inundated with article after worksheet of random non-fictional “reading comprehension” articles and texts on turtles, the Aleut people of Alaska, or fossils found in New Guinea, from some workbook or collection just to say that you “covered” Informational Texts. By far, the more you can use

these literature-related non-fictional texts to supplement your teaching of fiction, the more meaningful and effective your teaching—fostering student engagement, motivation, and comprehension.

Please check back for more on "Attacking the Common Core Standards" with Informational Texts – Part Three: Using textual evidence to support inference in Non-Fiction Texts




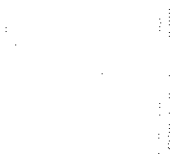

Do you have any other suggestions for using Historical Context or any favorite types of Informational Texts in your classes? Please share!

Thanks for stopping by!

Kristen

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